Thunder in the West Portending Tempest in the East

NATO's Rejuvenation vs Russia's National Security amid Great-Power Competition

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Abstract
The article discusses NATO's evolution after the end of the Cold War with an emphasis on the changes that have occurred since 2014. NATO's policy and strategy are analyzed in the context of changes in the U.S. national security strategy and policy and the evolution of Washington's approach to great-power confrontation, and the gradual emergence of U.S.-China rivalry. Cooperation and confrontation with Russia have served American foreign policy goals. The key goal is to make American allies step up their military-political activity in the interests of the United States. This involves

a redistribution of the military burden between the United States and its allies as well as the development of the defense industry in European countries and their policy in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States was able to significantly increase bloc discipline and make the EU pursue a policy that meets Washington's needs. The author states that NATO does pose a threat to Russia. The previous potential for rapprochement has been lost irretrievably. The confrontation will be long. To prevent escalation and incidents, it is necessary to maintain communication channels between Moscow and Brussels. Sooner or later, the parties will have to negotiate new security architecture in Europe, but Moscow should conduct dialogue with Washington, Paris, and Berlin, not Brussels.

Keywords: NATO, national security strategy, military expenditures, defense industry, national security, Indo-Pacific Region, great power competition.

NATO will mark the 75th anniversary of its founding in 2024. An anniversary summit will be held in Washington, D.C. Three quarters of a century is a long time for a military-political alliance. It is time to evaluate interim results, draw conclusions, and make assumptions about what awaits NATO in the future—a new lease on life or aging and decline.

This paper examines the latest history, current state and prospects of NATO in the context of its relations with Russia, the evolution of the U.S. national security strategy and policy, and the U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). It analyzes the military spending of NATO countries, the development of the military-industrial complex as well as the prospects for the United States' European policy.

The starting point of NATO's newest history is 2014, when the coup in Ukraine, the reunification of Crimea with Russia, and the events in Donbass revived the alliance's historical *raison d'être.* But let me briefly dwell on the preceding stage that began after the end of the Cold War.

MOSCOW-BRUSSELS

The signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997 and the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002 neither stopped NATO's eastward expansion nor resolved the fundamental contradictions between the alliance and Russia. On the contrary, it can be stated that the semblance of political reconciliation between Moscow and Brussels helped in part legitimize the fourth and fifth rounds of the alliance's expansion and disguise the contradictions between Russia and NATO, which did not go anywhere but grew deeper. This concerns NATO's actions in the Balkans and its relations with Ukraine.

In 1997, NATO and Ukraine signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership. Paragraph 8 of the declaration adopted at NATO's 2002 Prague summit describes quite positively relations with Russia and the creation of the Russia-NATO Council in May of the same year. Paragraph 9 spells out NATO's position towards Ukraine and the prospects for its Euro-Atlantic integration. Considering what happened 20 years later, NATO's Prague Declaration looks ominous.

Russia's concerns voiced in 2007 were not heard. President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference was taken lightly, dismissively, and hostilely (Shanker and Landler, 2007). To a certain extent, its effect was the exact opposite of what the Russian leader had apparently hoped for. It did not prevent but rather somewhat precipitated the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the decision to keep the door to NATO open for Ukraine and Georgia as was clearly stated in the Bucharest summit declaration.

The coercion of Georgia to peace and the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia further cooled relations between Moscow and Brussels but did not sever them, and in 2009, the NATO-Russia Council resumed its work.

It is highly tempting to view NATO's policy towards Russia after the end of the Cold War, and especially in 2009-2013, as strategic deception similarly to what United States considered Chinese deception in the past (Lukin, 2023). But like conspiracy theories, deception theories usually have little to do with reality. However, there is a bit of truth to the idea that Moscow was "deceived" by Brussels and Washington, and that Western countries made a strategic miscalculation and acted arrogantly in their geopolitical pursuits (Tebin, 2017a). But the opposite is also partly true: the experience of resolving the conflict in South

Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, the interaction on this issue with Paris, as well as the further normalization of relations with the United States and NATO led Russia to somewhat exaggerate the West's readiness if not recognize, then at least accept Russia's right to defend its national interests in the post-Soviet space.

At that time, the United States and NATO were interested in interacting with Russia on a number of strategic issues, primarily Afghanistan and missile defense. NATO's Strategic Concept, adopted in 2010, emphasized the fight against terrorism, non-proliferation, missile defense, and crisis management.

Following the 2008 crisis that had shaken the West, Washington and Brussels were interested in normalizing relations with Moscow, but insofar as it served their own interests. No one was seriously going to respond to Russia's concerns about the alliance's further eastward expansion, let alone changing its long-term policy because of Moscow's opinion.

As it became clear later, the view that "the best way to manage conflicts is to prevent them from happening" was ditched for the sake of NATO's expansion in accordance with its open doors (for all except Russia) principle. However, as long as Victor Yanukovich was the president of Ukraine, the "Ukrainian issue" was not so acute in relations between Moscow and Brussels. NATO "respected" Ukraine's non-bloc status, but the promises made in Bucharest were neither forgotten nor retracted.

In early 2010, Russia's concerns about the U.S. and NATO policy deepened. As far as can be judged, the Arab Spring and particularly the intervention in Libya made it totally clear to Moscow that no agreement could be reached with the West.

Russia increased its military budget significantly (more than doubling it in 2015 from 2005) while NATO's military spending (Stefanovich, 2021) remained the same. Russia also carried out military reform and rearmed its Armed Forces (including nuclear forces). At the same time, this seemingly "one-sided militarization" (in reality Russia was simply restoring its combat capability after a decline in the 1990s) could not eliminate imbalances in the military potentials and

Moscow's sense of vulnerability. Russia's military spending increased from 3.7% to 8% of NATO's level, but this did not lead to a fundamental change in the balance of power. When capabilities differ by an order of magnitude, it becomes largely irrelevant whether the actual ratio is 27 to 1 or 12 to 1. Such a disparity between Russia and NATO cannot be fully eliminated either by nuclear weapons (especially as the role of non-military and "subthreshold" instruments of rivalry grows (Bogdanov, 2023)), or by situational détente.

Old and post-Cold War problems came to a head in 2013-2014. A summit in Wales marked NATO's return "to its roots," that is, containing and confronting Russia in Europe. Eight years later, this resulted in Russia's special military operation (SMO) and, almost immediately, in a major proxy conflict between Russia and NATO. Let us try to look at the events of 2010-2014 and 2014-2022 not through the lens of Russian-Ukrainian relations or the EU policy, but in a broader context through the American national security policy, paying special attention to the role of confrontation between the great powers and the emergence of U.S.-China rivalry.

LIKE IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS...

The following lines from the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review of 1997 are now seen in a completely new way: "In the period beyond 2015, there is the possibility that a regional great power or global peer competitor may emerge. Russia and China are seen by some as having the potential to be such competitors..." (Cohen, 1997, p. 22). The Taiwan crisis of 1996 led many American experts to think about the future of U.S.-China relations (Khalilzad et al., 1999). U.S. Congress began to pay increased attention to China, obligating the Pentagon in the early 2000s to prepare annual reports on the development of China's military strength.

However, in the 2000s, the question of future confrontation with China and confrontation between the great powers was studied by a relatively small group of experts, military officers, and government officials who were wary of China's rise. Their opponents adhering to a skeptical (Pendley, 2008) and partnership approach remained in the majority for a long time. The United States sought to integrate China, "peacefully striving for great-power status" (Zheng, 2005), into the American-centric world order as a "responsible stakeholder" (Zoellick, 2005). However, by the end of the 2000s, the United States' apprehensions had begun to grow (Kraska, 2010).

The second half of the 2000s was a time of unprecedented interest in the military-political aspects of China's rise, future U.S.-Chinese relations, and great-power confrontation (O'Rourke, 2023, pp. 39-40). So the American strategy would soon make a "pivot to Asia" under Barack Obama (Clinton, 2011).

For a long time, American policy in the IPR was markedly non-confrontational. This was not the Obama administration's choice but a consistent long-term U.S. policy. We can recall the U.S. maritime strategy adopted in 2007 under George W. Bush, which described a world of international cooperation where there was hardly a place for great-power confrontation. Such a peaceable disposition stemmed partly from excessive optimism that the world order built around American leadership would last long. Washington did not pay due attention to the risk that this world order would be challenged by Russia or China, in part because of growing contradictions spurred in many ways by the United States itself. But it is equally important that Washington needed to buy time amid protracted operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the 2008 financial crisis that followed.

Remarks made by Admiral Jonathan Greenert, who served as Chief of Naval Operations in 2011-2015, are quite telling. In the summer of 2014, he was asked about how to counter China's military power at sea and in the air. The admiral replied: "If you talk about it openly, you cross the line and unnecessarily antagonize" (LaGrone, 2014). Greenert noted the level of U.S.-Chinese mutual trade and then added that all these issues were being actively discussed secretly and confidentially.

There were no such restrictions against Russia. There was no need to "unnecessarily antagonize" Russia. The volume of mutual trade between Russia and the United States was relatively small, while Russia's active commercial ties with the U.S.'s European allies provided an additional reason to step up hostile rhetoric and alarmism (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016), especially after 2014.

After the end of World War II, reliance on the allies was among the fundamental principles of American military-political strategy. Even Bush W. Bush advocating unilateralism and Donald Trump acting quite extravagantly did not deny the importance of allies but approached relations with them in a special way. While the political and strategic autonomy of Europe did not meet Washington's interests, the development of Europe's military potential under U.S. control served them perfectly. But in reality, the exact opposite happened in the 2000s and the early 2010s: Europe's military potential was declining, but its political activity was increasing.

The overall U.S. strategy—maintaining the American-centric world order and implementing a "pivot to Asia"—required additional resources. Being involved in Iraq and Afghanistan and facing the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, Washington sought to reduce the burden on its own budget and at the same time increase the total amount of resources on the Asian track. This could only be achieved if the U.S. allies, primarily NATO members in Europe, got involved deeper in the defense and security processes. It is also worth remembering that the U.S. share in the gross world product decreased from 34% in 1985 to 24% in 2019, according to the World Bank.

For a long time, the U.S. had tried to convince its European allies to boost defense spending. U.S. Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Victoria Nuland spoke about this quite openly in 2006 (Nuland, 2006). Since the mid-2000s, NATO's target for military spending was 2% of GDP, but most alliance members were significantly below this level. The American allies had been reducing their military spending and with it their military potential, thus putting more pressure on the United States. In 2011, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had to admit that the operation in Libya, when the United States for the first time had allowed its European allies to play the main role, revealed "serious capability gaps and other institutional shortcomings" (Gates, 2011). Gates appeared to be quite pessimistic about the NATO countries' ability to increase their defense spending and urged them to think not so much about military spending itself as about "how these limited (and dwindling) resources are allocated and for what priorities" (Ibid).

The situation was further exacerbated by the U.S. government debt ceiling crisis in 2011, which led to the adoption of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the reductions in military expenditures. The crisis in NATO's relations with Russia could give the United States what the operations in Libya and Afghanistan could not—getting more from the European allies in military-political terms while at the same time strengthening bloc discipline within NATO.

As a result, Ukraine's Euromaidan in 2013 and the crisis that erupted in 2014 gave the United States and NATO what they needed, that is, an enemy that, unlike China, could be demonized, official defense spending requirements obligating the American allies to increase military expenditures to 2% of GDP (Defense Investment Pledge) by 2024, and tighter bloc discipline.

COMPETITION SHORT OF WAR

The U.S. great-power confrontation rhetoric intensified significantly after 2014 both in public speeches and in strategic documents. In 2015, many senior Pentagon officials spoke about growing threats from Russia. These included not only the EUCOM commander and the EUCOM's service component commanders, but also the Air Force Secretary and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Also in 2015, the U.S. National Military Strategy said that "the probability of U.S. involvement in interstate war with a major power is assessed to be low but growing" (The National Military Strategy, 2015, p. 8). In 2017, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy recorded the beginning of a new era in great-power competition and the key role of challenges posed by China and Russia.

The ideas of expanding the sphere of confrontation and blurring the line between war and peace occupied a significant place in U.S. military thought in 2015-2017. One of the results of this process was the development and adoption of the U.S. Multi-Domain Battle concept at the end of 2017. According to a number of high-ranking

U.S. military officers, including National Security Council Chairman, General Joseph Dunford, the confrontation with Russia and China is a competition short of war or, in a more detailed form, an adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict. These ideas were developed further (Bogdanov, 2023) and stated in the Biden administration's National Security Strategy and integrated deterrence concept; they materialized most directly in the NATO-Russia conflict that broke out in Ukraine in 2022.

The topic of great-power confrontation and the Russian threat serves a number of purposes. Firstly, it should ensure the long-term strategy to preserve the American-centric world order, shift the focus to the IPR, and engage the allies more actively. Secondly, it allows the Pentagon to fight for resources amid military spending cuts. In 2016, General Dunford said in an interview that "our greatest challenge over the next couple of years is to continue to meet our requirements for current operations, and to also make the proper investments to ensure our military forces are ready and capable of meeting the challenges of tomorrow" (Kitfield, 2016).

Dunford found an ideal ally in the person of James N. Mattis, the first secretary of defense in the Trump administration. In 2017, they joined forces to convince the Congress of the need for long-term military spending increases of 3-5% per year above inflation. In 2017, U.S. defense spending was at its lowest since 2005 (according to SIPRI, in constant prices of 2021). Let us now take a brief look at the U.S. military policy in Europe. After the events in Crimea and Donbass, the United States stopped reducing its military presence in Europe and began its moderate buildup. In the summer of 2014, the U.S. launched the European Reassurance Initiative (later renamed the European Deterrence Initiative, or EDI) designed to secure funding for U.S. measures as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve. Having allocated slightly less than $40 billion to the EDI from FY 2015 to FY 2024, the United States was able to significantly strengthen its capabilities in Europe.

As of January 2022, the U.S. had a total of 80,000 troops in Europe and increased their strength to 100,000 by March 2022. This number will remain relatively stable in the foreseeable future. The American presence on NATO's eastern flank, primarily in Poland and Romania, has been increased significantly. And yet the American presence in Europe is considerably below the Cold War-era levels even despite the SMO. The military buildup required the redeployment of troops from the Middle East and the use of the National Guard and reservists.

One of the priorities is the allocation of significant funding under the EDI for prepositioned stocks and infrastructure development. In total, more than half of the total EDI budget was earmarked for that purpose. All this was accompanied by the European countries' efforts to solve logistical problems in the event of a large-scale conflict in Europe. Many problems, primarily those related to the redeployment of significant contingents and military equipment across Europe, remain, but a lot of work has been done over the past years as could be seen from the NATO military supplies to Ukraine.

One cannot but notice the consistency and continuity of the American foreign policy pursued by the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. U.S.-China relations deteriorated in 2018 amid the trade war started by Trump, but the role of great-power confrontation began to grow under Obama. Trump's defiant behavior towards the European allies was in stark contrast to Obama's, but in essence it stemmed from the latter's "pivot to the East" policy. This was mentioned by French President Emmanuel Macron in his interview with *The Economist* at the end of 2019 (Macron, 2019). The EDI has also been implemented very consistently for almost a decade by three U.S. presidential administrations.

THE MILITARY BURDEN

The analysis of the changes in NATO military spending since 2015 is based on the official NATO statistics released in July 2023 (Defense Expenditures, 2023). It should be noted that the data for 2022 is not final, and the data for 2023 is an estimate that may turn out to be overly optimistic (or less likely pessimistic). In many ways, 2014-2015 was a preparatory period, and in 2015, NATO's defense spending even decreased. After 2015, NATO military expenditures grew every year (in constant prices). The most significant growth was recorded in 2017 and, according to estimates, is expected again in 2023—5.9% and 8.3%, respectively. In total, spending has increased by almost 23% since 2015 (in 2015 prices): less than by 13% in the United States and by 42% in other NATO countries. The share of Canada and NATO's European members in total spending increased from 28% to 32% (including new members: Finland, Montenegro, and Macedonia).

In 2015, NATO's military spending target of 2% of GDP (Defense Investment Pledge) was met by the United States and also by Greece and the United Kingdom. In 2023, according to NATO estimates, the number of such countries was expected to increase to 11: in addition to the United States, Greece, and the UK, these are Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The military burden of NATO countries, excluding the United States, was 1.42% of GDP in 2015 and was projected to be 1.74% in 2023. For the United States, these figures are 3.52% and 3.49%, respectively. NATO's overall military spending, including the United States, is 2.48% and 2.64%, respectively.

Thus, the United States has generally fulfilled its task—it has ensured a noticeable real increase in NATO military spending and kept its own military burden unchanged. At the same time, 2% of GDP remains an uphill fight for the American allies, and the situation is unlikely to change significantly by the end of 2024.

The most striking increase in defense spending was registered in the Bucharest Nine (B9) countries—an alliance of NATO's eastern flank countries, created officially at the end of 2015—Bulgaria, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Lithuania and, somewhat surprisingly, Hungary were the absolute leaders, showing the greatest growth of about 270% over nine years, followed by Poland with 189%. At the same time, Poland's military budget increased from 1.88% to 3.9% of GDP, and in absolute terms, Poland may become sixth among NATO countries in 2023.

Importantly, the projected sharp growth in 2023 was largely associated with large arms and military equipment purchases by a number of countries. The second element of NATO's military spending policy is that at least 20% of the defense budget should go to the major equipment programs, including related R&D. All NATO member countries without exception were expected to reach this target in 2023. A significant part of this increase is used not to develop the EU defense industry but to purchase arms and military equipment from the United States, South Korea, and Israel.

Even with NATO's expansion since 2015, the combined number of troops has increased by just 8%, while the share of European countries and Canada has grown from 58% to 60%. Many B9 countries have significantly increased the number of military personnel: in relative terms, the most serious increase is expected in Latvia and Lithuania; in absolute terms, in Poland. The increase was made up for by personnel cuts in Italy, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal. The lack of progress is accompanied by staffing problems and resource shortages for the implementation of often highly ambitious plans to boost NATO's military capabilities (Barry, et al., 2023).

The assessment of the British Armed Forces made in 2015 is quite indicative: "We end up with an exquisite force of great equipment, but insufficient manpower, with insufficient training and education, to properly exploit the force that is available to the country" (House of Commons, 2015, p. 16). Seven years on, most of the problems are still there, and some have even worsened. There are serious capability gaps, which Gates spoke about in 2011. When comparing the approaches of the United States and European countries to multi-domain integration, a RUSI expert noted in July 2023 that European countries hoped to "somehow create capability from effectively nothing" and are often busy "generating the enabling function without any force to enable" (Bronk, 2023).

In 2022-2023, some experts and certain countries called for raising defense spending targets, sometimes quite radically to 2.5% of GDP. However, as was expected (Tebin, 2023), the final communiqué adopted at the Vilnius summit included more reserved wording matching the formula previously announced by Jens Stoltenberg that 2% of GDP should be "a floor, not a ceiling." The communiqué also stated "that in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed..." (Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023).

Indeed, it would be premature to declare any further ambitious goals like 2.5% of GDP since the total military burden of NATO countries in 2023, excluding the United States, was expected to be 1.74% of GDP, according to NATO's forecast. Defense spending in many large countries, such as Germany, Turkey, Canada, Spain, and Italy, is not only below 2% but is also below the average of 1.74%, excluding the U.S. The UK, one of NATO's leaders in military spending, has tempered its ambitions amid economic difficulties. The Integrated Review Refresh, released at the beginning of 2023, sets an ambitious goal of 2.5% of GDP, but with an important proviso that this can only be done "over time, as fiscal and economic circumstances allow" (Integrated Review, 2023, p. 12).

This sort of explains Trump's irritation and his scandalous speech at the NATO summit in Brussels in 2018, when he demanded that the NATO allies increase their military spending to 4% of GDP. Against the backdrop of the conflict in Ukraine, the Biden administration has achieved much more in terms of mobilizing allies and increasing bloc discipline. However, Trump's rhetoric cannot be called ineffective or ascribed to his extravagancy. The slowdown in military spending growth in Canada and NATO's European countries is largely due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the fact remains that military spending by the U.S.'s NATO allies in 2017-2020 grew steadily and much faster than ever before or after.

EUROPEAN DEFENSE INDUSTRY'S TROUBLES

The state of the defense industry in NATO countries was one of the most and painful issues in 2022-2023. The situation is not so acute in the United States, but it is quite worrisome in Canada and European countries. Against the background of noticeable but insufficient progress in boosting military spending, the military strength and the state of the defense industry are assessed by a number of experts as "shockingly poor" (Bergmann and Monaghan, 2023). A significant part of NATO's military spending in 2022-2023 was associated with arms supplies to Ukraine. Supplies have empties out NATO's own stocks, and the measures being taken to resume arms production are assessed as insufficient and in any case will not give quick results. Military-technical cooperation with the United States, Israel, and South Korea also distracts resources that could otherwise be invested in the European military-industrial complex.

The European defense industry is not as efficient as the American one since they developed differently after the Cold War largely due to differences in military spending and foreign policy approaches. After the end of the Cold War, the United States cut military spending, but at the same time the duration and cost of developing key weapon systems increased, which strongly consolidated the defense industry at the national level. From the very outset, the American government's policy towards the defense industry consistently combined laissez-faire with dirigisme. As a result, huge diversified and vertically integrated groups with long value added chains began to appear in the American defense industry. The size of the domestic market and active military-technical cooperation and public policy allowed the defense industry to preserve not only key competencies but also competition. For example, in 1998, the government did not approve a merger of Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman to create a military-industrial supergiant.

In Europe, the creation of defense corporations like Lockheed Martin or Raytheon (now RTX) was complicated. The low level of military spending and pan-European integration pushed the European defense industry towards consolidation, but these processes were significantly hampered by differing national interests, taxation, antitrust, intellectual property, and investment regulations that were less convenient than in America. As a result, the most successful technology giants in Europe owe their position either to a high share of civilian products (Airbus, Safran, Rolls-Royce, Fincantieri) or to active involvement in the American market (BAE Systems, Leonardo).

Currently new investments in the European defense industry go towards meeting the most pressing needs, such as replenishing stocks of weapons supplied to Ukraine and increasing the production of ammunition. There is a risk that Europe's innovative potential may decline in the long term, affecting its ability to carry out large-scale programs, including next-generation aircraft.

The American market is quite big to accommodate several defense industry giants, carry out integrated development of technologies, and implement large-scale investment projects. National legislation protects domestic producers from foreign competition, including European. According to the Defense News Top 100 data for 2022 (Defense News, 2023), there were six corporations in the United States with defense revenues exceeding $10 billion (total defense revenue being almost $220 billion). In Europe, there were four such corporations with total revenue of about $60 billion. The British defense industry is overly concentrated: BAE Systems accounts for 63% of the revenues received by British DNT100 companies, while Lockheed Martin accounts for just about 20% of the American corporate revenue. In addition, the British defense industry stands apart from the EU military-industrial complex. The French defense industry has to compete hard globally due to the limited domestic market. In addition, the growth of the French defense industry is curbed by complicated relations under partnership arrangements with German defense contractors, including KNDS and Airbus. France has no national defense giants like BAE Systems.

A striking example of contradictions within Europe is the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) proposed by Germany. Nineteen countries have joined it since its launch in August 2022. At the same time, key European countries like France, Poland, Italy, and Spain remain outside the initiative. Paris has criticized the program because of the excessive share of American and Israeli systems in it and suggested considering an alternative option, giving priority to European-made anti-aircraft missile systems.

The United States is interested in the development of the European defense industry but solely as a source of personnel, innovation, and technology. The European defense industry should complement the American one and specialize in specific areas. The U.S. has a similar position with regard to the EU's defense and security policy, which intensified after 2014. The European Union's military-political activity was based on alignment with, if not subordination to, NATO and the United States (Tebin, 2017b). The strengthening of bloc discipline and Euro-Atlantic solidarity and the weakening of European defense identity aspirations are just two of the main successes achieved by the United States and NATO since 2014.

Acting both directly and through countries showing strong hostility towards Russia, the U.S. is seeking to push the leading European countries in the right direction in terms of military spending, defense industry development, and foreign policy. One can be ironic about Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas urging the European Union to make multibillion-dollar investments (Kallas, 2023), while her country's share in the EU potential is close to zero (about 0.2% of GDP and 0.3% of the population), but when this voice is joined by Poland, the Czech Republic, the United States as well as numerous think tanks, it can seriously affect both Berlin and Paris. In this sense, the strengthening of pan-European institutions can limit national autonomy and encourage the governments of European countries to follow Washington and Brussels.

THE EASTERN VECTOR

NATO is stepping up interaction with American allies in the IPR. In 2022, representatives of Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4)—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—attended a NATO summit for the first time. NATO's key partner in the IPR, both in terms of potential and involvement, is Japan. Australia is committed to regional formats and interaction with the United States and Great Britain; South Korea is focused on specific problems, such as engaging with NATO to resolve security issues on the Korean Peninsula, and on military-technical cooperation with Poland; and New Zealand's potential and involvement is insignificant. Tokyo's positions are the broadest. Japan shares the idea of interconnection and commonality of security interests between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific parts of the collective West. The main factor in this interconnection is the deepening long-term strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing. Japan's minor but symbolically important participation in NATO's largest air exercise since the end of the Cold War—Air Defender 2023—is quite noteworthy.

In the future, NATO's involvement in Asian affairs and the U.S.-China rivalry will increase. The new NATO Strategic Concept, approved in 2022, is in tune with the U.S. National Security Strategy adopted later that year, including in terms of policy towards China. The main focus of NATO's Asian policy will not be on military presence, but on political coordination, military-technical cooperation, interaction on advanced technologies, information and cyber security, as well as resilience, which has become quite trendy lately.

The European Union has also been increasing its activity in the Indo-Pacific Region since 2014 when it launched the CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) program in the Western Indian Ocean. In 2020, the program was expanded to South and Southeast Asia, as well as the Pacific. In 2021, the European Union adopted the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, focused, among other things, on cooperation in the field of trade, scientific research and innovation, but also on expanding European maritime activities in the region. Germany stepped up its policy in the IPR and published Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2020.

The EU's Asian policy reveals a contradiction between the European Union as an independent player, including as a potential balancer between the United States and China, and its role as a junior partner of the United States and NATO. Another set of contradictions involves dual positions of some European countries regarding China and the United States, as well as each other. This is most clearly seen in France. Paris is trying to remain active in the region and interact with all key Western countries, while at the same time seeking to avoid unnecessary confrontation with China. Besides, its AUKUS-related humiliation lingers and is unlikely to be overcome any time soon. Paris disapproves of the excessive intensification of NATO activities in the IPR as borne out by its disagreement with the opening of a NATO mission in Japan (Gray and Irish, 2023). The most likely explanation of that is the fear that NATO's more active role in the region will worsen Franco-Chinese relations and thus limit France's ability to pursue an independent policy in the region.

Just like Berlin, Paris is verbally against choosing sides in the U.S.-China confrontation and views this policy as an opportunity to ensure the European Union's interests and develop relations with major regional powers, primarily India. At the same time, the idea of interconnection between security issues in Asia and Europe, actively advanced by the United States, has become an integral part of the Western narrative. European countries obviously lack the capabilities, resources, and political will to pursue a real "third way" policy.

One should pay attention not only to the European factor in Asian politics, but also to the Chinese factor in transatlantic politics. The U.S. is actively trying to restrain China's penetration into Europe. The Posture Statement of the commander of the U.S. European Command, General Christopher G. Cavoli, made in Congress in April 2023, is quite telling. The general paid much of his attention to China and its "predatory and unfair practices." Cavoli noted that China sought to strengthen its presence in Europe, threatened the interests of the United States, American allies and partners. Chinese investment and activity in the field of critical infrastructure and advanced technologies is a serious cause for concern. Cavoli is also worried by the strengthening partnership between Russia and China and its impact on the situation in the area of the European Command's responsibility (Cavoli, 2023, pp. 4-6, 9-11, 21, 23).

STRATEGIC VISION FOR EUROPE'S FUTURE

Unlikely scenarios of isolationism and/or serious domestic crisis excluded, the U.S. will continue to control its European allies militarily and politically. The most significant, but not critical, problems may arise with Paris and Berlin. At a high level of abstraction, the future U.S. strategy boils down to three ideas.

The ***first*** one is leading from behind. European allies will play an increasingly important role in containing and competing with Russia. The U.S. allies will shoulder much of the burden in securing a presence on NATO's eastern flank. The U.S. will provide coordination and overall leadership, as well as capabilities in critical areas. These include extended nuclear deterrence, supply of key weapon systems command and control, reconnaissance and special operations forces, as well as conventional deterrence, primarily air and sea components. The ground presence will remain relatively moderate, but it can be significantly increased in the event of a crisis, thanks to, among other things, the accumulated prepositioned stocks, investments in logistics and infrastructure, and the practical experience of massive troop redeployment to Europe, gained during military exercises.

The ***second*** idea is that the United States will continue its porcupine strategy on the eastern flank of NATO, using both the resources of the B9 countries and Finland, and Western European countries and Canada. The porcupine strategy was first proposed in the late 2000s by American experts for U.S. policy towards Taiwan (Murray, 2008). However, drawing on the experience of the conflict in Ukraine, this strategy is now being implemented on the eastern flank of NATO.

The ***third*** idea is that the United States will push for the specialization of its allies. This concerns military capabilities, defense industry development, and forward presence. This will allow Washington not only to use its allies' limited resources and capabilities more effectively, and take advantage of their geopolitical position, but also to tighten its grip on the allies and consolidate their dependence on the United States.

As far as NATO is concerned, Russia should take seriously two factors.

Firstly, it should counter NATO's expansion in Moldova, Transnistria, and Transcaucasia. NATO's goal is to isolate Russia in the Black Sea region and create challenges to Russia's interests and security in the Transcaucasia and, ideally, in Central Asia, too. This policy is pushed forward not only by the United States and NATO, but also by the European Union, including as part of the European Political Community initiated by Macron.

Secondly, Russia should attend to the situation on the borders between NATO and Russia (and Belarus). The likelihood of an open conflict between NATO and Russia should be taken seriously. The risk of escalation and expansion of the conflict in Ukraine, the possibility of serious incidents on NATO's eastern border or in the border areas of Russia and Belarus require Moscow to make plans and prepare necessary capabilities in advance. One of the most serious potential risks comes from Poland and the Baltic countries, which may undertake reckless actions both in the Ukraine conflict and against the territory of Russia or Belarus (Wintour, 2023). Of particular concern is Kaliningrad, which the West views as a source of threat, including in the context of the notorious Suwałki Gap (Karnitschnig, 2022), and at the same time as Russia's weak spot (Van Tol, et al., 2022).

The dynamics of relations between Russia, China, and the United States will be essential for American policy in Europe in the foreseeable future. The development and results of the conflict in Ukraine will undoubtedly be crucial for the future of relations between the United States, NATO, and the European Union, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. At the same time, the Ukrainian factor all by itself plays a secondary role in the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, and U.S. European policy, the important elements of which are the "Russian threat" and the interconnection of security issues in Europe and Asia.

The most appropriate long-term strategy for Russia is to ensure and maintain the status of an independent great power (Tebin, 2022). Russia must soberly assess its own strength and potential, pursue a pragmatic non-ideologized foreign policy, and rely on its own resources. Russia's unconditional priorities include continuing its own development, ensuring security, and preserving and advancing societal well-being, but at the same time staying away from isolationism.

The events of 2014-2023 partly became possible due to the "ideological trap" that caught the United States and NATO because of their double standards, ideologized policies, and Russian knowledge degradation. These factors have deteriorated further, and the crisis in relations amid the ongoing U.S. and NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine is perhaps deeper than during the Cold War.

Russia should take into account NATO's experience in the 1990s-2010s and avoid repeating its mistakes. Russia needs a pragmatic and non-ideologized view of NATO. It should be assumed that NATO and the leading Western powers will not disappear or fall apart, and relations with the alliance will not improve in the foreseeable future. Sooner or later Moscow will have to start a new dialogue on the regional, and possibly global, security architecture not with Brussels, but probably with Washington, Paris, and Berlin.

The mantra that NATO poses no threat to Russia is not true. This Western narrative makes it impossible to reach agreements that would facilitate long-term stable and peaceful coexistence between Russia and NATO countries. To achieve such a settlement, both sides will eventually have to make compromises and acknowledge each other's concerns and interests. Alternatives are bleak: a long conflict with an unclear outcome and a barely predictable degree of escalation, or a long "neither war nor peace" confrontation similar to the Cold War or the standoff on the Korean Peninsula.

At this point, dialogue with NATO as an organization is meaningless for Russia. However, Moscow should not dismiss the opportunity to talk and interact with NATO countries, primarily the United States, but also Turkey, Hungary, Finland, France, and Germany. Currently, this is necessary in order to at least reduce escalation risks and prevent incidents.

While reorienting its policy to the World Majority, Russia should keep up the level of Western expertise. It should also avoid repeating its own mistakes of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Dialogue and cooperation on certain issues alone cannot prevent confrontation. Local, tactical progress will make no difference in the long term if there is no parallel progress in resolving strategic contradictions. Strategy is more important than diplomacy, and potentials are more important than intentions.

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